

# IS DEGROWTH ALREADY COLONIAL?



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📅 June 28th, 2021 👤 Saurabh Arora 💬 [Leave a comment](#)

*by Saurabh Arora and Andy Stirling*

We are very grateful to Timothée Parrique for **engaging so thoughtfully** with our essay on **‘degrowth and the pluriverse: continued coloniality or intercultural revolution’**? This is the kind of frank and constructive discussion that is needed to build crucial alliances and solidarities for transformations to sustainability. And it is in this mutually supportive spirit, that we would like to respond to Timothée.

Both in his title and first paragraph, Timothée characterises the key critical message of our essay as requiring a reassurance that “you *should not worry about degrowth turning imperial*”. He then elaborates that

the two of us as authors “worry that degrowth’s recent fame might create a sense of supremacy”.

It is perhaps a sign of an ambiguity in our own essay, that Timothée’s reply not only reflects a serious misunderstanding, but also nicely demonstrates exactly the kind of narrative we “worry” about. We are **not** saying (as he implies) that the problem lies in the “growth” of the degrowth movement – that it may “turn imperial” as its “fame” expands.

What we are instead arguing, is that there **already exist** key features of degrowth discourse (whatever scale it is enacted at), which are in danger of reproducing coloniality in at least two inter-related ways: let’s call them *topological universalism* and *bordered reflexivity*.

## TOPOLOGICAL UNIVERSALISM

In our essay, we do not simply construct a dichotomy between magnitude and topology. We are clear that one always comes with the other. What we argue is that by foregrounding magnitude of material throughput (irrespective of whether it is measured by GDP or not), degrowth discourses can marginalise attention to radical differences in *patterns of relations* – or ‘topologies’.

Of course, given the vibrant diversity of degrowth discussions that we acknowledge, it is not difficult to find cases where degrowth is highlighted not just as reduction of material throughput, but also as transformation in ways of living. There is the imagination, for instance, of transforming an **elephant into a snail**, which can at first sight appear to be topological. Unfortunately, however (in true **Modernist style**), degrowthers are still here typically focusing on scale and prioritising **categories over relations**.

It is in the quality of being relatively tiny (not through any identified

feature of its topology) that the snail categorically signifies small-scale and slow production (e.g., through commoning and cooperatives). And it is equally in the quality of being relatively huge (rather than in any identified pattern of relations), that a categorical contrast is made with elephantine industries geared towards incessant growth. A snail is small, an elephant is large, but the *topologies* behind these starkly-scaled categories are neglected in degrowth discourses. So this neglect obscures the fact that contrasts between snails and elephants are not just about size and shape: they're also crucially about rich differences in patterns of relations, or topologies, across socioecological worlds.

Related to this is the aspect that in 'a world of many worlds', there are no singular or definitively objective ways to become either 'snail' or 'elephant'. This means that alongside many 'light modern' degrowth experiments with ecocide laws or nature sanctuaries, there are further multitudes of radically contrasting patterns of public service and ecological relations making up other worlds of the pluriverse.

In our original essay we called on degrowth advocates to recognise such topological differences between modern and other worlds of the pluriverse. It is by continuing to marginalise such differences of relational patterns between worlds, that degrowth discussions are implicitly adopting a position of *topological universalism*. A product of racist coloniality that derides and damages pluriversal difference, such presumed universalism is so deeply ingrained in the modern psyche, that it can – even in ostensibly critical discourses – be presented as a virtue.

It is therefore a sign of exactly the tendencies that we are concerned about, that such universalism is adopted even where **degrowth advocates are rightly keen to assert anti-colonial politics**. For instance, Gandhi and Nyerere are simply lumped together

(presumably on the basis of a notionally shared anti-colonial identity), rather than making the crucial relational and topological distinction between **Gandhi's explicitly anti-modern politics** and **Nyerere's promotion of a socialist modernity**.

## BORDERED REFLEXIVITY

Most if not all of degrowth's prominent spokespersons are based at Northern universities (as are we). Rightly focusing efforts on the North, many degrowthers like Timothée identify allies among Southern alternatives, including the **buen vivir movements** in Latin America and **eco-Swaraj** in India. Recognising that such alliances and solidarities are central to furthering sustainability transformations, we applaud this move.

However, **alongside others**, we do wonder if those Southern alternatives that gain a mention, are sometimes to a disproportionate degree, found interesting as allies because they are seen as fulfilling degrowth's core agenda of reducing material throughput. And where such alternatives are claimed to be **pluriversal** to some extent, might this suggest that the many worlds of the pluriverse only really matter for degrowth insofar its own core agenda is served?

The inadvertent coloniality embedded in this kind of imagined subordination of the pluriverse is, of course, not just a possible jeopardy in degrowth. It is a danger equally in our own position – because we too are deeply embedded in colonial (and intersecting patriarchal and capitalist) hegemonies. So the issue arising from this shared embeddedness is not about pointing fingers – nor is it self-flagellation – but rather about underscoring what might be thought of as responsibilities to be *reflexive*.

To enjoy contingent privilege as a critic, is to hold *responsibilities* to

reflect on and challenge the full array of this privilege. This requires us to go beyond magnitudes of material advantages, by reflecting on how hegemonic modern topologies afford epistemological privilege and patronage – equally to degrowth and our own present friendly critique.

It is through deliberate efforts explicitly to recognise and actively to uphold the manifold topological differences between modern and other worlds of the pluriverse, then, that these reflexive responsibilities can be respected. It is when *reflexivity is bordered* – either by the prioritisation of magnitudes or by tacitly assumed modern topologies – that these (admittedly tricky and ambiguous) responsibilities may inadvertently be abrogated.

What these responsibilities might mean for each is not in the end a matter for others. But in the case of degrowth, perhaps such questioning might point to a need to more actively resist temptations to presume a singular hegemonic identity that is claimed to “**save the world**”, and instead aim at a rather less glamorous role of **embracing a pluriverse** in all its messy relational complexity.

After five centuries of colonial-Modern violence, control and foreshortening of the pluriverse, this recognition of topological multiplicities of ‘the world’ as many worlds of knowing, valuing, healing, commoning, cooperating, struggling, emancipating, celebrating, rhyming, growing, building, spiritualising and loving with others, is arguably the most fundamental egalitarian imperative of our times.

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